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A View of Revealed Religion;

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S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT

THE ORDINATION

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THE REV. WILLIAM FIELD

OF WARWICK, JULY 12, 1790.

BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D. F.R.S.

WITH

A C H A R G E,

Delivered at the same Time,

BY THE REV. THOMAS BELSHAM.

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КОНГАМДОЛУТ

THE NEW MILLION FIELD

ЧАСТЬ ПЕРВАЯ: ПРИЧИНА КОМПАНИИ



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СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ И ПРОГРЕСС

МАНДРАКОВЫХ ЧЕССЕЙ

СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ И ПРОГРЕСС

THE PREFACE.

THOUGH publications of the nature of *this* have seldom any extensive circulation, yet as some persons into whose hands it may fall, may want information concerning the idea of *ordination* that prevails among Dissenters, I shall observe that we (at least many of us) do not now mean by it the *giving of orders*, without which a person could not be considered as properly qualified to exercise the office of minister in a christian society. As all our societies are independent of each other, the members of each of them are, of course, the sole judges of the qualifications of the person

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whom they chuse to be their minister. Consequently their appointment is his proper *orders*, or *title to officiate* among them; and all that is done by the ministers who bear any part in what is usually called *the ordination service* (besides thereby virtually expressing their approbation of the choice of the congregation, and giving their minister the right hand of fellowship) is to recommend him and his labours to the divine blessing by prayer, and to give him and the people proper advice.

On this idea it is now customary with many Dissenters, especially those who are called Presbyterians, for the minister to discharge all the functions of his office, baptizing and administering the Lord's supper, as well as preaching

P R E F A C E.

preaching and praying, before ordination, in order more effectually to remove the prejudices which still remain with many, founded on the idea that some powers are conferred on this occasion, powers which qualify him to do *after* this ceremony what he could not do *before*.

The proper *ordination service*, therefore, consists in the *prayer over the candidate, and the charge.* But the congregation, and also many strangers, being usually assembled on the occasion, and especially a number of ministers being present, it has been usual for one of them to deliver a discourse, or *sermon*, on some subject relating to christianity in general, or the ministry of it in particular; and instead of the particular *confession* of

of faith, which was formerly required of all candidates for the ministry (his soundness in which was then deemed essential) certain *questions* are put to him, which lead him to give as much as he thinks proper of his views of christianity and the ministry of it, and the motives and maxims of his own conduct, for the instruction of the audience.

The ceremony of *imposition of bands*, which in primitive times accompanied the action of praying for a particular person, by which the apostles communicated spiritual gifts, and which was afterwards supposed to be necessary to the conferring of proper qualifications for the gospel ministry, is now generally laid aside by us, since we are conscious that we have

have nothing to impart, and wish not to encourage superstition.

Ordination being now no longer considered in the light of *conferring orders*, as in Epispcopal, and the proper Presbyterian churches, many of the more liberal Dissenters neglect it altogether ; thinking it to encourage superstition, and to keep up a mere *form* when the *substance* is wanting. But when the design of ordination, as above explained, is well understood, when the person ordained shall have performed every part of the ministerial duty before, as well as after, his ordination, though the name given to the service no longer suggests the idea that was formerly annexed to it, no superstition is encouraged. And since the connexion

nexion between a minister and his congregation, and especially the first that he forms, is a very serious concern, there cannot, surely, be any impropriety, but on the contrary the greatest propriety, in making it an occasion of solemn prayer; and then exhortation or admonition, from a minister of greater age and experience, to one who has but lately entered upon the office, is particularly seasonable. I cannot help, therefore, expressing my wish, that some service, to which the name of *ordination* may well enough be given, may be kept up among us, at the same time that every precaution is taken to prevent superstition with respect to it.

J. PRIESTLEY.

Birmingham, 7 DE61
Nov. 1, 1790.

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V I E W

OF

REVEALED RELIGION.



MONOGRAPHIA BRITANICA

A SERMON, &c.

— That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, in the knowledge of him; the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power, to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead.

EPHES. i. 17—20.

THE apostle, writing to those who had lately been heathens, frequently, and very properly, reminds them of the great benefit they derived from the knowledge of the gospel. This he does more especially in the introduction to this epistle to the

A 2 Ephesians.

Ephesians. It is indeed, of great importance that our minds should always be impressed with a sense of what we owe to the fountain of all good in this most important respect, especially as, having never ourselves seen, or known, much of heathenism, we are too apt to think less of the happiness of our emancipation from it. And as we are now assembled for the purpose of recommending to the divine blessing a fellow labourer in the work of the christian ministry, I shall take the opportunity of bringing to the recollection of this christian assembly, and of myself, the several particulars of which the knowledge we derive from revelation, and more especially from christianity, consists.

But I shall first consider the propriety of having recourse to any measures whatever on the part of the Divine Being, farther than the natural means that he had employed for the moral improvement of mankind.

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That the Divine Being has really made provision for promoting the virtue and happiness of men in the constitution of nature and of the world, is not to be denied. There are numberless particulars in the make of our bodies, and in the faculties of our minds, which, if attended to, will teach us that vice and wickedness (consisting in the excessive and irregular indulgence of our passions) is hurtful to man ; that it tends to debase our natures, and subjects us to pain and anguish ; and that if we would live in the greatest dignity and happiness, we must live in the habitual practice of all virtue. Some will, therefore, ask, Is not nature alone a sufficient guide to virtue and happiness ? and may not men, by these helps, and the proper use of the *reason* with which they are endued, be their own instructors ? Why might not mankind have been left to themselves, when their own reason, assisted by observation and experience, would teach them to correct their vices, and improve their natures to the utmost ?

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and when the Divine Being had done thus much for us, what occasion was there for his doing any thing more?

In replying to this, it must be acknowledged that, if men would make the most of their reason, and conscientiously obey all its dictates, it would be a sufficient director in the conduct of life. But what must we say if, from whatever cause, and through whatever foreign influence, men become indisposed to make this right use of their reason, and especially if they be not sufficiently apprized of all the consequences of their conduct; and if, in that state of ignorance and darkness, they want stronger *motives* than will ever occur to themselves, to the practice of universal virtue. In these circumstances it was surely highly expedient that the great parent and friend of mankind should interpose, to apprise them of these consequences, that he should send proper persons, duly authorized, to engage their attention, and thus to inform their judgment, interest their affections, and direct their conduct.

I must

I must farther observe, in answer to those who object to the scheme of such *occasional interpositions*, and who are struck with the idea of the superior dignity of an absolutely uninterrupted operation of the *established laws*, that we are not at liberty to suppose either *man*, or *the world*, to be constituted differently from what they are ; because we are no proper judges of such different arrangements of things and their consequences. And considering how men are actually constituted, we may safely conclude that if it was at all necessary (as we cannot but suppose it to be) that such beings as we are should keep up an *attention* to their maker, this great end will be better answered by his maintaining some visible intercourse with them, than by a rigorous adherence to any original constitution of things whatever, while himself was kept out of view.

The bulk of mankind (and by this we are to judge) do not naturally inquire into the cause of what they see to be *constant* and *invariable*. They see, for example,

the sun to rise and set, and all the changes of the seasons to take place, without ever reflecting on their author, or final cause, or at least acquiescing in any lame account of them, so that something out of the common course of nature was necessary to arrest their attention, and lead them to think of the author of nature, of what they see and experience every day.

The authors of the Greek and Roman theology never went farther in their speculations than the *visible universe*. They had gods in great abundance, but imagined the world to be more antient than them all; and the great object of the most antient idolatry were the sun, moon, and stars, the earth, and other parts of *nature*, having never imagined that these had any author.

Besides, in order that man may keep up an idea of God, as a *person*, a being with whom they have to do, as the inspector and judge of their conduct, it seems necessary that there should be on his part some

some *personal acts*, such as promulgating laws, sending messengers, expressing his pleasure or displeasure at their conduct, and the like. Without something of this kind, the course of nature, though bearing infinite marks of intelligence, might never suggest the idea of an *intelligent person*, the proper object of prayer, a law-giver, and a judge.

We clearly see this in the case of numbers who, disbelieving revelation, do at this day, seriously maintain that there is no intelligent principle in the universe, besides the visible works of nature. They, therefore, do not admit what we may call the *personality of the supreme cause of all*; and without this there will never be any such thing as piety towards God, as a Being whom we conceive to be ever present with us, as the inspector and the judge of our conduct. These persons never pray.

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For want of this the best of the heathens were intirely destitute of that most essential branch of virtue. And without an habitual regard to God, as our common parent, there is no sufficient foundation for the duties we owe to his offspring, or even the duties that respect ourselves. Where there is no proper *lawgiver*, there can be no proper *law*. Without a proper regard to God in all our ways, our minds would be liable to be disturbed and unhinged by the events of life, and we should more especially find ourselves destitute of power to carry us through severe trials and sufferings in the cause of truth and a good conscience. But an habitual respect to the being, the presence, and the providence of God, extending through this life and the next, is abundantly sufficient for all these purposes. It was therefore, most truly said by our Lord, *No man cometh to the Father but by me*, or, as we may interpret it, *revealed religion* is the only foundation

foundation of what is termed *natural religion*.

It is not only on the authority of the most probable *reasons*, but on the evidence of the most indisputable *facts*, that we assert the necessity of extraordinary interpositions on the part of the Divine Being, to engage the attention of mankind to himself, in order to reform the world, and restore the practice of virtue among men. We see in history how grossly ignorant the heathen world remained of the nature and perfections of God, and of the purity of his worship, and how lost they were to a just sense of piety and virtue, while they were suffered to continue without supernatural revelation. And from the length of time in which the wisest and most polished nations continued in this state of ignorance and corruption, it was manifest that natural means were not sufficient to enlighten their minds, and reform their conduct. These, as we are authorized

authorized to say, had been long tried without effect. For while arts and sciences were cultivated, and brought to a considerable degree of perfection, religious notions, and religious rites, became, if possible, more absurd. For after the worship of the sun, moon, and stars (which was the original idolatry of mankind, and continued to be that of the more barbarous part of the world) the polished Egyptians and Greeks added that of dead men. And how deplorable, in a moral respect, is the state of those parts of the world to which the knowledge of christianity has not reached, or in which its glorious and salutary light is extinguished.

It was therefore a measure highly worthy of the wisdom and goodness of almighty God, in order to accomplish his gracious design of raising men to a state of glory and happiness, to appoint some persons to be, as it were, his ambassadors to the world lying in darkness and wickedness,

edness, to instruct them in the truths relating to their most important concerns, and to lay before them, with plainness and energy, the proper motives for reforming their conduct; and it was necessary that, for this purpose, these persons should come with authority, bearing evident tokens of a divine mission, by the working of *miracles*, or such works as men might be satisfied could not be performed without God, the author of nature, and who alone can control its laws, being with them.

With this view, if any history be credible, the Divine Being has actually commissioned various persons to communicate his will to mankind, and especially to warn them of the future consequences of their evil conduct. These persons were chiefly of the nation of the Jews; and the object of their missions was to instruct their countrymen in the first instance, and then other nations who had intercourse

intercourse with them, in the fundamental principles of true religion, in order to guard them against the abominable vices and extravagancies to which idolatry naturally led them. In like manner was Jesus Christ (of the same nation of the Jews) commissioned to bring the last and most complete revelation of the will of God to man ; so that nothing now remains to be done on the part of God for the moral instruction and reformation of the world.

What it is that God has by these repeated revelations done for mankind, and especially by Jesus Christ, I shall now proceed to specify. But I must farther premise, that the great and ultimate object of the mission of Christ was not at all different from that of the preceding prophets. According to his own representation, in the instructive parable of the vineyard let out to husbandmen, God first sent *servants* to them, to receive the fruits

fruits of the vineyard, and last of all, with the same general view, he sent his *son*, or a person so much more distinguished, as to be entitled to that peculiar appellation, though he was of the *same nature* with them, *in all things like unto his brethren.*

1. By these extraordinary interpositions we have been instructed in the nature, perfections, and moral government of God, and the rule of human duty; a knowledge of a very important nature, and which mankind, after having been instructed in it, by *becoming vain in their imaginations*, had lost. This knowledge we find in Moses and all the prophets. There we find that God is one, that he made and governs the world, that he is every where present, observing the conduct of men, that he is merciful to the penitent, but will punish the obstinately wicked. We are also taught in revelation how the one true God is to be worshipped in the most acceptable manner,

ner, viz. *in spirit and in truth*, by purity of heart, and uprightness of life. According to Christ, the two great commandments, which include all the rest, are the love of God and of our fellow-creatures.

Thus was laid the foundation of all acceptable worship, and right conduct in life, and thus were the minds of men freed from a slavish and debasing superstition, which had taught them to seek to please God by other things than true goodness of heart and life, and had encouraged them to continue in the practice of vice, by trusting to vain compensations and atonements. This was one of the most important services that could be rendered to religion, and to mankind; as there is nothing to which they appear to be more prone than *superstition*, or unworthy notions of God, and consequently wrong methods of seeking to please him.

Beginning with these leading principles, did our Lord, following the example of
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the prophets who had preceded him, go on to instruct mankind in every useful principle of religion, concealing from them nothing that could in any respect influence their practice. And this, we clearly see, had the most direct tendency to promote the great scheme of our redemption, or deliverance from vice and misery. For before men can be reclaimed from vicious courses, they must be convinced of the evil of them. They must be shewn against how great a Being they are offending, and be informed what it is that will recommend them to his favour. Such knowledge as this is, in its own nature, necessary to all virtuous and religious practice. The judgment, or understanding, must first be enlightened, before the will can be renewed, the affections regulated, and the conduct reformed; as, in all cases, a thing must be *understood*, before it can be *practised*.

This excellent moral instruction was not, however, as I have said already, peculiar

to Christ. He did not pretend to teach men any thing *new* on these subjects. He only explained and enforced what had long before been taught by Moses and the prophets. But many of these excellent and most important moral precepts had been perverted, and the solid duties of piety, benevolence, and all virtue, had been made to give place to a most debasing and mischievous superstition. The same, indeed, has been the case with the moral precepts of christianity itself; so that there will always be great reason to caution men on this head, so prone are they to the indulgence of their appetites and passions, and so willing to find some substitute for moral virtue, if they can.

Christ did not teach any thing new concerning God, or the maxims of his government, because these things were sufficiently known to the Jews, and explained in their scriptures. The great doctrine of the *divine unity* was well understood, and taken for granted, by all
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the nation of the Jews. That there is one God, and there is no other than he, and that to worship him with the heart, is better than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifice, was a reply of a Jewish scribe to our Saviour, and which met with his perfect approbation.

Least of all had he any occasion to inform them that the Divine Being, the God and Father of all, as well as his own God and Father, was placable to his penitent creatures. This most necessary of all doctrines had been most clearly taught by Moses and all the prophets; so that nothing farther remained to be said on the subject. By Moses the Divine Being solemnly proclaimed himself to be a God merciful and gracious, long-suffering, abundant in mercy, goodness, and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. All the prophets exhorted to repentance on the same principle. *Return unto me, and I will return unto you,* is the constant burden of their preaching. Indeed, without this all exhortation to repentance would be in vain.

That Christ was himself, by his death and sufferings, the means of reconciling men to God, and of making it to be consistent with his justice to pardon the truly penitent, is a doctrine for which there is no countenance either in the discourses of our Lord, or the writings of the apostles. They all took it for granted, that all that was necessary to be done was to reconcile sinful man to God, not to reconcile God to man. In the fine parable of the prodigal son, Christ informs us that God, our true and affectionate Father, is ready to receive all his offending and penitent children, as it were, with open arms, without any intercession of others, or any atonement whatever. Through the whole of the scriptures God is represented as forgiving sin *freely*, and for *his mercy's*, or *his name's sake only*.

2. To give the greater weight to their instructions, all the prophets of God, with some few exceptions, exemplified them by their own conduct.

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But the benefit we derive from the example of good men recorded in the scriptures is only incidental, and is not to be confidered as any proper part of the scheme of revelation. Nay the examples of bad men, equally recorded in the scriptures, or in other authentic histories, may sometimes be of as much use to us as that of good men. Since, however, as christians, we profess to be, and are exhorted to be, in a more especial manner followers of Christ, I shall make a few observations with respect to this subject.

Now the example of Christ, like that of other good men, can only be of partial and occasional use to us. In a great variety of the most trying situations our Lord was never placed, so that in those cases his life cannot furnish any pattern for us. It is his general temper and character that we are to attend to, and an attention to this may be of great use to us, even in situations in which he himself was never placed. What were most con-

spicuous in him were the virtues of meekness, humility, heavenly-mindedness, and an intire devotedness to the will of God, in suffering as well as in doing ; and with these dispositions we shall in no particular case act wrong.

In obedience to the will of God, and to answer the great designs of his providence, he gave up his innocent life to the malice of his enemies, who put him to death in the most cruel and ignominious manner, in this, as well as in other things leaving us an example that we should follow his steps. *Forasmuch as Christ suffered in the flesh, we must arm ourselves, as Peter says, with the same mind. Because he laid down his life for us, we ought also, as John says, to lay down our lives for the brethren ; that is, we ought to serve mankind, at the hazard of every thing dear to us in life, and even of life itself.*

Our Lord's great heroism in suffering and dying as he did, will be more admired

mired the more we consider the circumstances of it, especially his extreme sensibility. That a man whose bodily frame was capable of suffering so much as his did under the mere *apprehension* of his approaching death, should, notwithstanding this, die with such noble and calm fortitude, and with such sentiments of piety and benevolence even to his enemies, is, indeed, wonderful. There is also something peculiarly trying in being the *first* to suffer in any cause. In bearing, however, not only pain, but hardships of various kinds, (some of them more trying than any kind of violent death) and bearing them also with a truly christian spirit, it is for the honour of christianity, and consequently of Christ, to say that many of the martyrs have not fallen short of the pattern set them.

As to the more common infirmities of human nature, such as the indulgence of sensual appetites and passions, we cannot suppose that the temptation to transgress would be much felt by a person

of his exalted character, and great expectations, and with a violent death in immediate prospect. There is, therefore, nothing very extraordinary, though highly worthy of our imitation, in this part of our Saviour's conduct.

I shall close this head with observing that, in all cases in which the example of *men* cannot be recommended, that of the ever blessed *God* is proposed to us in the scriptures. For we are exhorted to *be perfect as our Father who is in heaven is perfect*. This precept has the advantage of being an unerring rule of conduct. It will prevent our acquiescing in any limited degree of moral excellence; and recourse may be had to it with great advantage in those cases in which the supremacy of the Divine Being, and his infinite knowledge (by which he ever sees the most distant consequences of things, and by which he can bring good out of all evil) does not necessarily make the rule of *his* conduct different from that of *ours*.

3. In order to reform the world, and thereby raise men to a state of future glory and happiness, God has by Jesus Christ, in a more especial manner, revealed to them the knowledge of a future state of rewards and punishments, as supplying the most effectual motive to the practice of virtue. This is, indeed, the distinguishing excellence of the gospel. By this gospel *life and immortality are fully brought to light*, as it affords a more satisfactory evidence of a resurrection to a future and immortal life than had been given to the world before, so as to establish the belief of this most important of all truths to the end of time. This great end Christ effected, not only by preaching the doctrine with authority from God, evidenced by miracles, even such as raising the dead to life, but by being himself an example of what he announced to others; having submitted to die in the most public and indisputable manner, and having been raised to life, to the complete satisfaction
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of a sufficient number of the most com-
petent witnesses.

Had mankind, in a body, been asked what evidence they required for a doctrine so important and interesting to them, they could not have demanded more than was actually given them, viz. that the great preacher of the doctrine should, in his own person, afford them an example of its truth, by dying and rising again within a limited time.

This was no new doctrine to the Jews. The great body of that nation were then, and are to this day, fully persuaded of it. This must, in my opinion, have arisen from some very early revelation from God on the subject, but probably prior to the writing of the books of Moses; whatever difficulty we may now find in accounting for the remarkable silence concerning a doctrine of so much importance in his writings, as well as those of the Old Testament

tament in general. Had this great revelation been made to Moses himself, or to any of the subsequent prophets, we could not but have heard of it. But having been made known probably to our first parents, and, though it was lost in other nations, having been always retained by the Jews, there was the less occasion for any mention of it in books designed for their peculiar use. But what was well known to the Jews would be *good tidings of great joy to the Gentile world*, which was ignorant of it.

When *the fulness of time was come*, that God thought proper to manifest his paternal regards to all his offspring of mankind, it was highly proper that, as the original record of this great doctrine of a resurrection was then lost, it should be renewed; that so no reasonable doubt might remain concerning it; and this was completely effected by the resurrection of Christ, who likewise brought it into view in all his discourses. For he did not, like Moses,

Moses, give his disciples any expectation of happiness in this life, but only at the resurrection of the just ; and to this *great hope that was set before them*, he taught them cheerfully to sacrifice all their interests here, and even life itself ; assuring them that they who should lose their lives for the sake of the gospel, would receive them again, with infinite advantage, in the world to come. It was his express declaration, that his kingdom was not of this world, and he enjoined all his followers to *lay up their treasure in heaven*. We also learn from the apostle that we are to *walk by faith and not by sight*, since *the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal*.

When God had by this means imparted to mankind this most important information concerning himself and his moral government, concerning their duty here, and their expectations hereafter, nothing more was requisite in order completely to effect his great design, the reformation
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of the world, and the preparation of men for that future happy state which is announced to us in the gospel. For with these helps, the rational nature that God had originally given to man was sufficient, without any supernatural operation upon their minds, to their restoration to his favour and their future happiness. The historical evidence that we now have of the miracles, the death, and resurrection of Christ, is of itself sufficient to produce *christian faith*, or a firm belief of the great facts on which christianity rests; and this faith, or belief, is sufficient to induce men to reform their conduct, and to fit them, by a life of virtue here, for a state of happiness hereafter.

Accordingly, no farther help than this is ever promised to us in the gospel. Like good seed, in our Saviour's most instructive parable, it is scattered promiscuously on all kinds of soil; but nothing is done to the soil itself, and therefore it brings forth much fruit, or none at all, just as

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the minds of men were previously disposed to receive it. *The gift of the spirit,* of which we read, always means some *miraculous power*, calculated for the confirmation of the gospel in the early ages only. We are taught, indeed, to pray to God to be led into, and to be kept in, the ways of truth and virtue. But we are also taught to pray for our daily bread; and as our daily bread is not given to us without our own labour, so likewise good dispositions of mind are only to be acquired by the use of proper means; though both the means, and the power of using them, being from God, it is right to ascribe all to him, to pray to him for every blessing, temporal or spiritual, and to thank him for all of them alike.

As a practical improvement of this doctrine, I shall observe (1.) that from it we may infer the dignity of human nature; man being a creature the most distinguished by his great creator among his works here below, in that we are the proper

proper subjects of his moral government, and fit heirs of immortality. This implies that we are capable of unlimited improvement; and what we see of man in this life makes this probable. We see no bounds to increasing knowledge and ripening virtue, though we, and all created beings, shall ever fall infinitely short of the perfection of the supreme Being, who is, and ever will be, alone,¹ the *absolutely good*.

Let us, then, my brethren, with all humility and gratitude to God, for every thing that we have, or are, respect ourselves, as so greatly distinguished by the author of all excellence, and not carelessly and wickedly abandon the glorious prospects that are set before us. For a beggar in our streets to reject the offer of a kingdom, would not be more preposterous. We can hardly form an idea of greater depravity of mind than for a man seriously to prefer utter annihilation to that immortality which is brought to light

light by the gospel, and to maintain that the great and extensive views it opens to us do not tend to enlarge and exalt the mind, and qualify men to act with more dignity, generosity, and integrity, as well as true piety, in this life, in consequence of being taught that the connexions and habits which we form here below, will be continued beyond the grave, where we shall again find ourselves under the government of the same God, and be again happy in our subjection to him, and in our renewed intercourse with each other to all eternity. To maintain, as some have done, that this christian doctrine of a future state has any hurtful tendency, appears to me to argue such depravity of mind, as can only be produced by gross vices, such as make men secretly wish that it may not be true. Thousands have found that the firm belief of it tends to make men *purify themselves even as God is pure.*

2. Let

2. Let us learn from this doctrine to cherish a sense of the great blessings of christianity, as the only means of giving men this glorious prospect, and preparing them for future happiness. For that any of the human race will survive the grave nature gives us no reason to expect.

Christians would have a much higher sense of the value of the gospel, if they had not forgotten what heathenism was. That such vices as the heathens were addicted to, some of them too abominable and horrid to be mentioned in such a place as this, should have been encouraged by any thing that ever bore the name of *religion*, and even should have been practiced as *religious rites*, which recommend men to the object of their worship, would not now be credible, did not the most authentic history remain as an indisputable evidence of the facts. Let us then bless God for the gospel, which brings us from darkness to light, from vice to virtue,

from death to immortality; and let us do every thing in our power to extend the knowledge and the blessings of it to all the human race. More especially, as a means to the great end, let us exert ourselves to purify it from those corruptions which both defeat the great design of it, and prevent its reception among Jews, Mahometans, and heathens. This fatal tendency has every thing that, in any degree, renders it less amiable, or less credible; and nothing does this more than any infringement of the great doctrine of the unity of God, and the equity of his government.

All that I have represented having been done for us, the best instructions having been given us for a virtuous life, exemplified by the lives of holy men, prophets, and Jesus Christ; having had the most satisfactory evidence given us of a future state of retribution after death, nothing more could have been done to

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induce men to abandon a course of vice, and to live in such a manner as to secure a happy immortality. If the nature of *virtue*, and of *man*, be considered, it will be evident that nothing more could have been done for us. The *will* cannot be forced. It can only be determined by proper motives. God requires that we should give him our *hearts*, which can only be engaged by the force of persuasion.

As far, therefore, as it became the Divine Being to interpose, nothing has been left untried to reform the world. If then, notwithstanding all these measures for our good, we continue disobedient, and addicted to vice, may not the Divine Being with the greatest propriety speak of us as of the children of Israel of old. “What could I have done to my vineyard more than I have done; nevertheless when, I looked that it should bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes.”

We cannot think that, after all this that has been done for us, we are at liberty to neglect and slight it, and that God will take no notice of our disobedience and perverseness. No, our sins under the dispensation of the gospel are attended with every aggravation that can heighten their guilt, and increase our condemnation. As the apostle says, *which way can we come off, or escape, if we neglect so great salvation.* Let it not be our condemnation, that *light is come into the world, but that we loved darkness rather than light, because our deeds were evil.*

We who profess what we wish to be considered as *rational christianity*, have least of all any just excuse for a deficiency in that temper, and a want of those good works, which our religion requires. We, depending upon the free mercy of God to the penitent, reject the idea of being saved by any righteousness that is not our own. We believe that no man can obey the laws

laws of God for another, or suffer the punishment due to the crimes of another ; and we disclaim the belief of any thing whatever standing in the place of moral virtue. We believe the gospel both to contain a sufficient rule of life, and also sufficient motives to the observance of it.

As therefore, my brethren, we not only *name the name of Christ*, and profess ourselves to be his disciples, but think that we profess it in greater purity than many others, let us give proof of it by departing farther from all iniquity, and by being *a peculiar people zealous of good works*. If this be not our resolution, and steady uniform conduct, there is not a nation under heaven that will not rise up against us, and condemn us, at the last day. For no people ever enjoyed greater advantages than we do. If they neglect their advantages, which are inferior to ours, their condemnation will be proportionably less. But if they improve them, while we neglect ours, double will be their recompence,

pence, and double will be our condemnation. May we all seriously consider these things, *the things that relate to our everlasting peace and welfare, before they be for ever bid from our eyes.*

END OF THE SERMON.

MR. BELSHAM's

C H A R G E.



THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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THE CHARGE

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THE CHARGE
ADDRESSED TO
THE REV. WILLIAM FIELD.

THE hints of advice, Sir, which I shall upon this occasion submit to your consideration, will take their rise chiefly from that declaration of St. Paul, in which, in a few comprehensive words, he exhibits his own character, and that of every faithful minister of the gospel.

2 Cor. ii. 17. *For we are not as many which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the fight of God, speak we in Christ.*

I shall

I shall not detain you at present, with illustrating the connexion in which the words of the text are introduced: it is sufficient for my purpose, to observe that they appear to express in the judgment of St. Paul, a summary of the duties of the christian minister, and of the temper and spirit by which he ought to be actuated in the discharge of his office, and without which, whatever his abilities and attainments may be, he will prove but as *the sounding brass, or the tinkling cymbal,* and cannot rationally expect either honour, comfort, or success.

In the first place, the great duty of a christian minister is to *speak in Christ.*

You well know, Sir, that the apostle Paul, amidst the variety of engagements which continually crowded upon him, had not much time to spare for epistolary correspondence; so that when he was under a necessity of writing to his particular friends, or to christian societies, he studied a degree

a degree of brevity which not unfrequently borders upon obscurity, and he often comprises a multitude of ideas in very few words. To *speak in Christ* is an elliptical expression by which we are then to understand (as I presume no person at all conversant with this apostle's writings will dispute) teaching the doctrine of Christ, that doctrine which had been *revealed to St. Paul by Christ**, the doctrine which Christ himself had preached, which he had confirmed by his miracles, which he had sealed with his blood, and which he had commissioned this eminent apostle, who from a furious persecutor had been transformed into a zealous advocate for truth and righteousness, to diffuse through the world, both among Jews and Gentiles.†

In this respect christian ministers are the true successors of the apostles; and

* Gal. i. 12.

† Acts xxvi. 17, 18.

though

though they profess not to have received either their instructions, or their call, from such high authority, nor to challenge that implicit regard to their message which the apostles often claimed, and to which they were justly entitled, in consequence of the extent and accuracy of their views of christian doctrine, the authority which they received from Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the miraculous powers with which they were furnished; yet it is their great duty, the honour and the privilege of their office, to publish what they apprehend to be the true doctrine of Christ, as the representatives of their great master, to address men in his name, to teach what he taught, and, as *the ambassadors of Christ, to beseech them in Christ's stead to be reconciled to God**.

Upon this head it were easy to enlarge, and to multiply directions; but I forbear. Your own heart, Sir, will instruct

* 2 Cor. v. 20.

you

you in your duty, and will supply you with the best motives to the faithful diligent performance of it. But one hint I must take leave to suggest, viz. that it is an object of the highest importance to the interest of truth and piety, that a minister should be particularly attentive to the rising generation, and should spare no pains to instil into the young and susceptible mind, just and pleasing apprehensions of religious truth. That the idea of God may be one of the earliest impressions upon the understanding; that from the first moment when children learn to lisp his name, they may think of him with delight, as their best and kindest friend, and may associate the most pleasing sentiments with the duties they owe to God. A filial spirit is what God requires; it is that fragrant incense which ought to perfume every sacrifice. It is that alone which renders every duty pleasant in the performance, and acceptable to God. The sooner this spirit is infused the better: and this can only be accomplished

accomplished by exhibiting to young people the most pleasing, which are at the same time the most rational and beneficial, views of the supreme Being. Of those who are grown old in wickedness there is very little hope.

If you can check the career of folly, if you can moderate the excesses of vice, if you can effect some external reformation ; this is all that in ordinary cases you can reasonably expect. But that *which has long been crooked cannot easily be made straight**. *The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots†.* If false and gloomy thoughts of God and his government have taken early possession of the mind, if by length of time and force of habit, they have entwined themselves about the fibres of the heart, and have associated themselves with every devotional sentiment, it is in vain to hope that the baneful and deep-rooted prejudice will yield to the

* Eccles. i. 15.

+ Jer. xiii. 23,

gentle

gentle influence of calm and sober argument. Death, the *great teacher*, can alone emancipate the understanding, and eradicate those hard injurious thoughts of the most amiable and beneficent of Beings, which embitter human life, and pervert to dejection and despondency those exercises of piety which to an enlightened and upright mind, are an inexhaustible source of consolation and pleasure. But if here and there an instance should occur of persons who in advanced age possess leisure, inclination, and strength of mind, to examine into the foundation of their prejudices, and to correct their unhappy errors concerning the Supreme Being, the feelings will not easily, perhaps never entirely, follow the dictates of the understanding; and when the attention is diverted to a different object, the old associations and modes of thinking and feeling will return again, as though the judgment had never been convinced.

It is, then, an object of unspeakable importance not only that young people

should

should be trained up to the practice of religion; but that their religious principles should be rightly formed; that they should be kept from all those views of God, and his government, and of the duties he requires, which would damp the innocent chearfulness of the mind, would inspire it with terror, and produce a servile and reluctant homage, so opposite to that filial spirit, that chearful obedience, which is most acceptable to God. It is very desirable that young persons should never recollect the time when they were not firm believers in the existence and goodness of God, when they did not think of him with sentiments of reverence and affection, when they did not rejoice in his protection, and government, and when they did not consider obedience to God as a privilege, as well as a duty.

And here, Sir, in my apprehension, a minister's chief busines and pleasure lies. Here he is called upon to exert his most valuable talents with the fairest prospect of success, viz. in fixing the best impressions

pressions upon the tender minds of the younger part of his society, and that by means of private instruction as well as by public addresses. And give me leave to hint an observation of the utmost moment to the success of your ministry, that the most important duties of the sacred office, are not those which are performed in public. I am, indeed, persuaded that the public preaching of the gospel is highly useful, and that without it the world would be much more ignorant and vicious than it now is. I admire the orator who can exhibit the interesting doctrines, and the essential duties of christianity in clear, elegant, and harmonious language ; who can support them by the most cogent arguments, who can enforce them by the most engaging motives, who can command attention, and can reach the heart by graceful elocution, united with manly sense, and with that genuine pathos which results from a firm conviction of the truth and importance of his subject, and from an earnest desire to be useful to his

D hearers

hearers in their most important concerns, I cordially wish him success. And multitudes, no doubt, are enlightened, and edified, and saved by his ministry. But yet, I am persuaded that it is the *still small voice* of private instruction, of prudent advice, of friendly admonition, of salutary reproof, of tender sympathy, and of christian consolation, which is usually found most efficacious to open the understanding, and to meliorate the heart. The wise and vigilant, and faithful minister, therefore, will be *instant in season, and out of season*, and will diligently seek after, and never willingly let slip, any favourable opportunity of promoting the cause of truth, and the interest of religion.

I now proceed, secondly, To illustrate that temper and spirit by which the apostle was animated, and which he insinuates to be necessary to form the character of a christian minister. *We are not as many who corrupt the word of God, but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.*

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In the first place, a christian minister is to be very careful that he doth not, as many do, corrupt the word of God.

You need not, Sir, to be informed that the expression *, in the original, signifies to debase generous liquors by impure mixtures for the sake of gain. And the apostle means to declare, that he did not adulterate the pure doctrine of Christ by the mixture of any foreign or inferior principles, as many at that time did. He particularly alludes to the judaizing zealots, who blended the ceremonies of the Mosaic ritual, and the absurdities, and burdens, of Pharisaic tradition, with the doctrine of Christ, and represented them as essential to salvation. The apostle could truly say that he did not, in this, nor in any other way, adulterate the word of God. For he knew it perfectly. He had learned it by express *revelation from Christ*†. Nor would he presume to violate the sacred depositum.

* Καπηλευοντες.

+ Gal. i. 12.

But what minister of the gospel will now presume to affirm that he in particular doth never corrupt the word of God? That the doctrine which *he* teaches, is the genuine, unmixed, undebased doctrine of Christ? That the christian religion has been sullied by grievous corruptions, is what we are all ready to acknowledge; that it is the duty of ministers to teach the word of God purified, as far as possible, from the dross of human inventions, none will deny. But where is the touchstone of truth, the key of knowledge to be found? Who will take off from our eyes the bandage of ignorance and prejudice? Who will direct us to the abode of truth, or discover to us the heavenly stranger? I am happy in the persuasion, that the world, under the benign influence of the gospel, and the government of perfect wisdom and goodness, is proceeding to a better state. All things are advancing to perfection by a gradual, but continually accelerated progress, and the time is approaching, when truth will reveal her radiant form to every upright inquisitive

inquisitive mind. Yes, my heart triumphs in the prospect of that glorious state of things, which the pen of prophecy has delineated in the fairest colours, when truth and peace shall visit this world, and the pure doctrine of Christ, by its intrinsic energy, and the superintending providence of God, shall purge itself thoroughly from all the feculence of error, and shall diffuse its saving beams throughout the world. The happy day is even now beginning to dawn. The rays of truth already penetrate the gloom, and error, ignorance, and superstition are gradually vanishing before it. The darkness is passed, and the true light now begins to shine. Happy they who will hereafter be witnesses to its meridian splendour. Happy we, my brethren, if like the venerable patriarch, we can look forward to the *day of Christ**. This is our best solace amidst the struggles to which an honest zeal for truth, and the difficulties to which a laborious, patient,

* John viii. 56.

serious enquiry after it, and an honest open profession of it, will *now* sometimes expose us. But, in the mean time, we must esteem it our honour, if we are employed as instruments in promoting this glorious cause, either by our labours, or by our sufferings.

It is your duty then, Sir, if you are desirous of keeping clear of the charge of *corrupting* the word of God, to study the scriptures with care and diligence; to divest your mind as far as possible of every prejudice; to aim at nothing but truth; to search after the genuine sense of the sacred writers, without warping it to support a favourite system; never to think that you have learned enough, nor to be ashamed of acknowledging an error; ever to keep your mind open to conviction, and to be thankful for every degree of information, from whatever quarter it may arise, in whatever mode it may be communicated, and to whatever consequences it may lead; knowing that the tendency of

truth

truth must ever be ultimately beneficial; and to all your researches, you must add earnest prayer to the Father of lights, for wisdom and instruction to guard you from every criminal, from every pernicious error.

I am far from maintaining that by this means you will secure infallibility. I am well apprized of the narrow limits of the human intellect, and the force of inveterate prejudice, often most powerful and most obvious to others, when least perceived or suspected by those who are the subjects of its baneful influence. But this I will assert, that when you have followed the directions which have just been prescribed, you have done all that feeble, fallible human nature will admit. That doctrine which you discover by these means, is to you the pure, unadulterated doctrine of Christ. This doctrine you must teach; without presuming either to conceal it, to add to it, or to take from it. And at the same time that you

cannot but regard other systems of opinions as corruptions of christianity, and cannot but think it your duty to warn your hearers against them, so far as they appear to have a pernicious tendency, I am very sure that you will never think of exerting an authority which, with whatever propriety it might be claimed by an apostle who had the gift of discerning spirits, can never, without the greatest indecency, be arrogated by fallible creatures, who have no such pretensions, the authority of anathematizing those whose sentiments differ from your own. If truth is your only object, you will not wish to support your own system of opinions any farther than they are consistent with truth, and by means which will not disgrace your character either as a christian or a gentleman; and you will hold yourself under obligation to the friend who will detect the falsehood of any principle which you entertain, how well grounded, how dear, how sacred soever, it may have been esteemed.

Permit me, Sir, to put the question, strange as it may found, whether there may not be some danger of corrupting the word of God, even by the use of scripture language, by the promiscuous introduction of scripture phrases, without annexing to them distinct ideas, or proper explanations. You well know that phraseology perfectly intelligible in one age and country, is often, by difference of circumstances, and modes of thinking, quite unintelligible in another, and that the bold metaphorical style of the East, is ill adapted to the frigid conceptions, and sober reasonings of the inhabitants of the West. But the principal obstruction to a right understanding of the scriptures, is, that we all come to the reading of them, prepossessed with our own systems, and interpret the language of them agreeably to our own hypotheses, without once asking ourselves the question, whether our systems be the same with those of the sacred writers, or whether they used their words in the sense which

which we annex to them. And in fact, it often happens, that the ideas which we have been taught to annex to scripture expressions, are such as never entered into the thoughts of the writers of the New Testament, and that their true meaning, when first discovered, frequently appears cold and far-fetched. From these considerations, I am sure you will infer the necessity of studying the scriptures with the closest attention, and of making them their own interpreters: of expounding them frequently to your hearers so as to lead them into their true meaning, that they may judge of the sense of a passage not merely by the sound of the words, but by the connexion in which they stand, and by the meaning of similar phraseology in corresponding passages. You will also see the necessity of frequently explaining difficult and doubtful phrases which you may occasionally introduce into your public discourses, and which custom and prejudice may lead your hearers to understand in a sense very different

different from what you apprehend to be the genuine meaning of the scriptures.

I am not afraid, Sir, that you will misapprehend the hints that I have suggested. You will be far from thinking that I intend the slightest disrespect to the sacred oracles. And I am confident that you will agree with me, that the greatest respect is then paid to the scriptures, when they are studied with the closest attention, and explained with the greatest freedom and impartiality.

We are not as many who corrupt the word of God, but as of *sincerity*; this is the second characteristic of the spirit of a christian minister.

By *sincerity* in this connexion, I understand the *undisguised declaration of truth, without regard to personal consequences*. It is such conduct as challenges the severest scrutiny, and will bear the test of the strongest

strongest and clearest light, as the original word imports*.

To be sincere, then, is to act upon the best motives, it is to be open and undisguised, it is to declare the whole counsel of God, and to keep back nothing profitable †. It is to teach boldly, and explicitly, whatever appears to be the genuine doctrine of christianity. All revealed truth must be important; an uninteresting unprofitable doctrine of revelation is an absurdity, it is a contradiction in terms, it is an affront to the perfections of God. To suppose that God would reveal a truth, the knowledge and belief of which would be of no use to mankind, is to suppose that infinite wisdom would act the part of superlative folly. And nothing can be more evident, than that a sincere and explicit profession of what appears to us to be truth, is the only means by which truth can make its way, and finally pre-

* Ειρηνείας.

† Acts xx. 27.

vail

vail in the world. To conceal what we believe to be the genuine doctrine of revelation under ambiguous expressions, is to betray the sacred trust reposed in us, it is to abandon the divine cause in which we are embarked, it is to be *ashamed of Christ and of his words*. Not that I mean to disparage christian prudence; far from it. There is such a thing as *casting pearls before swine*. Our divine Master and his apostles, have taught us both by precept and example, to unite the *wisdom of the serpent* with the *simplicity and innocence of the dove*, and to avoid giving unnecessary offence in the discharge of our important embassy. No one will say that it is the duty of a minister to publish every doubt that rises in his mind; much less to puzzle and perplex plain unlettered christians, who come to be instructed in the grand principles of wisdom and virtue, with subtle controversies upon intricate and difficult questions. But in all points of importance, where his own mind is quite satisfied, surely it is a minister's duty to speak out boldly, and where he is in suspense,

suspence, sincerity will not permit him to express himself with confidence. Prudence must judge in all. But let not christian prudence degenerate into worldly wisdom. Of this there is the utmost danger. To temporize and to disguise unpopular opinions, to flatter men in ignorance and prejudice, is the way to ease, to affluence, and to applause. But to be honest and sincere, to speak truth without disguise, and to oppose established errors, often leads to poverty, reproach, desertion, and contempt. Judge then, upon which side the danger lies. Few, I believe, have ever repented being too sincere. Many have been stung with remorse under the consciousness of duplicity of character, and of having, through fear of personal consequences, concealed truth under an ambiguous phraseology. And the cause of truth hath often suffered by the timidity of its professed advocates.

For who, Sir, should be willing to suffer in defence of truth, if the ministers of the gospel are not? How can we

we expect that our hearers will believe that we are in earnest, if we do not act with the most undisguised simplicity, and are not willing to take the consequences of avowing important truth? It is by the sufferings of its advocates and champions, that the wisdom of providence hath ordained that truth shall make its way. Our divine master was the first to fall in the glorious struggle. His apostles and their disciples followed his great example, and sealed their testimony with their blood. The reformers of the church from the corruptions of popery, were animated by the same spirit of christian heroism. And in the present age of comparative toleration, if we would approve ourselves the genuine disciples and faithful ministers of Christ, we must be content to bear his cross, we must be willing at the command of providence, to *forsake all and follow him*; and must account the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of the earth.

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My earnest advice therefore is, Be prudent; do not give unnecessary offence. Do not expose yourself to unnecessary hazard and inconvenience. Do not unnecessarily impede your acceptance and usefulness. But above all, *Be honest and sincere.* Secure to yourself the broad impenetrable shield of a good conscience. Keep back nothing that is profitable. Handle not the word of God deceitfully. And, as you will answer for your sacred trust another day, suffer no consideration of ease, reputation, or interest, to move you to betray the high cause in which you are embarked. *Let this be your rejoicing, even the testimony of your conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshy wisdom, but by the grace of God you have your conversation in the world.*

The apostle mentions another characteristic of a christian minister, which is, *to speak and act as in the sight of God.*

And

And O ! what will be the temper and conduct of that minister who sets God always before him ; who in every action of his life and ministry, doth, as it were, behold the eye of the supreme Being fixed steadily and invariably upon him for purposes the most interesting, the most awful, and the most encouraging ; to pity, to guide, and to succour under every difficulty ; to aid every generous exertion, and to mark, and frown upon, every wilful neglect of duty. Under such impressions, with what earnest solicitude will a minister prepare for the duties of his office, that he may not in the sight of God speak, or do, any thing unworthy of his character, that he may not offer the sacrifice of fools, nor utter crude and indigested ramblings in the name, and in the presence of God ! With what plainness and freedom, with what fortitude, with what dignity and energy, with what infinite superiority to mean and secular views, with what indifference to human applause, with what unconcern as to per-

fonsal consequences, will he declare *the whole counsel of God*; not daring to conceal what he believes to be important, that so he may be *clear of the blood of all men!* With what diligence will he seek, with what eagerness will he embrace, every opportunity of promoting the great ends of his ministry, instructing the ignorant, reclaiming the vicious, recovering the wanderer to the paths of wisdom and virtue, administering consolation to the afflicted, confirming and establishing the sincere christian! How will the apprehension of the divine inspection rouse him to unremitting exertions, whatever difficulties he may meet with, whatever temptations to negligence and supineness, with whatever indifference and neglect his services may be treated, whatever ungrateful treatment he may receive, or how little soever his apparent success may be! And what a tendency will this persuasion have, to engage the christian minister often to lift up his heart in devout aspirations after a divine assistance and blessing, and to ascribe

ascribe all that is good in himself, and all the success of his ministry, to the favour of the Almighty. Rejoicing in the consciousness of having laboured faithfully, abundantly, and successfully, he will humbly and thankfully add, *yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

I cannot then, Sir, conclude with a better advice or wish, than this, that you would *set the Lord always before you*, and that in the whole course of your ministry, you would *study to approve yourself to God*, to glorify his name, and to accomplish his will.

And permit me to add for your encouragement, that with this temper, and with these views your final success is infallible. If the object of your ministry be interest or applause, you may very possibly miss your aim; and if attained, how worthless, how contemptible an end! But if you have no other view than to be approved of God, and to accomplish his

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will, you cannot be disappointed in your purpose. It is hard to suppose that vigorous exertions upon such generous principles can fail of being eminently useful. But if the supreme Arbiter of events do not see fit to employ you as an instrument in promoting the cause of truth and virtue in the world (and who shall presume to dictate to him?) he can bow your will in placid resignation to his sovereign pleasure. And in the mean time, the generous purpose of the willing mind, with which he is perfectly acquainted, will in his account, be entered in your favour, as though it had been actually accomplished; and in the great day of final remuneration, it will not be forgotten that you had *it in your heart to have built a house to his name.*

7 DECEMBER

THE END.

